

disassociation of the oligonucleotides from the hairpin structures may be accomplished by heating or other means suitable to disrupt base-pairing interactions.

Further amplification of the detection signal is achieved by annealing the fifth oligonucleotide (similar or identical in sequence to the third oligonucleotide) to another molecule of the first hairpin structure. Cleavage is then performed and the oligonucleotide that is liberated then is annealed to another molecule of the second hairpin structure. Successive rounds of annealing and cleavage of the first and second hairpin structures, provided in excess, are performed to generate a sufficient amount of cleaved hairpin products to be detected. The temperature of the detection reaction is cycled just below and just above the annealing temperature for the oligonucleotides used to direct cleavage of the hairpin structures, generally about 55°C to 70°C. The number of cleavages will double in each cycle until the amount of hairpin structures remaining is below the K_m for the hairpin structures. This point is reached when the hairpin structures are substantially used up. When the detection reaction is to be used in a quantitative manner, the cycling reactions are stopped before the accumulation of the cleaved hairpin detection products reach a plateau.

Detection of the cleaved hairpin structures may be achieved in several ways. In one embodiment detection is achieved by separation on agarose or polyacrylamide gels followed by staining with ethidium bromide. In another embodiment, detection is achieved by separation of the cleaved and uncleaved hairpin structures on a gel followed by autoradiography when the hairpin structures are first labelled with a radioactive probe and separation on chromatography columns using HPLC or FPLC followed by detection of the differently sized fragments by absorption at OD_{260} . Other means of detection include detection of changes in fluorescence polarization when the single-stranded 5' arm is released by cleavage, the increase in fluorescence of an intercalating fluorescent indicator as the amount of primers annealed to 3' arms of the hairpin structures increases. The formation of increasing amounts of duplex DNA (between the primer and the 3' arm of the hairpin) occurs if successive rounds of cleavage occur.

5 The hairpin structures may be attached to a solid support, such as an agarose, styrene or magnetic bead, via the 3' end of the hairpin. A spacer molecule may be placed between the 3' end of the hairpin and the bead, if so desired. The advantage of attaching the hairpin structures to a solid support is that this prevents the hybridization of the two hairpin structures to one another over regions which are complementary. If the hairpin structures anneal to one another, this would reduce the amount of hairpins available for hybridization to the primers released during the cleavage reactions. If the hairpin structures are attached to a solid support, then additional methods of detection of the products of the cleavage reaction may be employed. These methods include, but are not limited to, the measurement of the released single-stranded 5' arm when the 5' arm contains a label at the 5' terminus. This label may be radioactive, fluorescent, biotinylated, etc. If the hairpin structure is not cleaved, the 5' label will remain attached to the solid support. If cleavage occurs, the 5' label will be released from the solid support.

15 The 3' end of the hairpin molecule may be blocked through the use of dideoxynucleotides. A 3' terminus containing a dideoxynucleotide is unavailable to participate in reactions with certain DNA modifying enzymes, such as terminal transferase. Cleavage of the hairpin having a 3' terminal dideoxynucleotide generates a new, unblocked 3' terminus at the site of cleavage. This new 3' end has a free hydroxyl group which can interact with terminal transferase thus providing another means of detecting the cleavage products.

25 The hairpin structures are designed so that their self-complementary regions are very short (generally in the range of 3-8 base pairs). Thus, the hairpin structures are not stable at the high temperatures at which this reaction is performed (generally in the range of 50-75°C) unless the hairpin is stabilized by the presence of the annealed oligonucleotide on the 3' arm of the hairpin. This instability prevents the polymerase from cleaving the hairpin structure in the absence of an associated primer thereby preventing false positive results due to non-oligonucleotide directed cleavage.

30 As discussed above, the use of the 5' nucleases of the invention which have reduced polymerization activity is advantageous in this method of detecting specific

nucleic acid sequences. Significant amounts of polymerization during the cleavage reaction would cause shifting of the site of cleavage in unpredictable ways resulting in the production of a series of cleaved hairpin structures of various sizes rather than a single easily quantifiable product. Additionally, the primers used in one round of cleavage could, if elongated, become unusable for the next cycle, by either forming an incorrect structure or by being too long to melt off under moderate temperature cycling conditions. In a pristine system (*i.e.*, lacking the presence of dNTPs), one could use the unmodified polymerase, but the presence of nucleotides (dNTPs) can decrease the per cycle efficiency enough to give a false negative result. When a crude extract (genomic DNA preparations, crude cell lysates, *etc.*) is employed or where a sample of DNA from a PCR reaction, or any other sample that might be contaminated with dNTPs, the 5' nucleases of the present invention that were derived from thermostable polymerases are particularly useful.

II. Generation Of 5' Nucleases From Thermostable DNA Polymerases

The genes encoding Type A DNA polymerases share about 85% homology to each other on the DNA sequence level. Preferred examples of thermostable polymerases include those isolated from *Thermus aquaticus*, *Thermus flavus*, and *Thermus thermophilus*. However, other thermostable Type A polymerases which have 5' nuclease activity are also suitable. Figs. 2 and 3 compare the nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the three above mentioned polymerases. In Figures 2 and 3, the consensus or majority sequence derived from a comparison of the nucleotide (Fig. 2) or amino acid (Fig. 3) sequence of the three thermostable DNA polymerases is shown on the top line. A dot appears in the sequences of each of these three polymerases whenever an amino acid residue in a given sequence is identical to that contained in the consensus amino acid sequence. Dashes are used to introduce gaps in order to maximize alignment between the displayed sequences. When no consensus nucleotide or amino acid is present at a given position, an "X" is placed in the consensus sequence. SEQ ID NOS:1-3 display the nucleotide sequences and SEQ ID NOS:4-6 display the amino acid sequences of the three wild-type polymerases. SEQ ID NO:1